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SUBJECT: 2005 INFLUENCE ANALYSIS: EL SALVADOR

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¶11. SUMMARY: Given its relatively small size (6.7 million people in an area smaller than New Jersey), El Salvador has a relatively rich media environment and a fairly well-defined number of "players" jockeying for power and influence. Though their combined circulation is scarcely 300,000, newspapers may be considered the most influential of the media. Internet and cable television access largely remains concentrated in the hands of educated urban dwellers, though the GOES is making a long-term effort to bring the Internet to all schools, and Internet-ready "info centros" are available throughout the country. While broadcast media reaches the largest number of people on a regular basis, print media and a variety of individuals and institutions - including churches, political parties, the business community, academia, civil society, overseas Salvadorans, and the U.S. Embassy - wield considerable clout, with the degree of influence of each depending on the issue involved. END SUMMARY.

THE MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

¶12. The media in El Salvador are relatively free, very competitive, and highly influential. News coverage is generally balanced, and opposing opinions are presented. The country's five national daily newspapers and six nationwide free-to-air television stations subscribe to and monitor the international wire services and also run regular news segments from CNN, CNN Espaol, Univision and Telemundo, all of which have "stringers" in El Salvador. Their programming and that of other U.S. and international stations are also available via local cable television providers. El Salvador also has at least 150 radio stations and a variety of magazines, though none like "Time" or "Newsweek." Many internationally-minded Salvadorans - those in the business world in particular -- are also exposed to U.S. news and ideas through their subscriptions to U.S. magazines and to publications like the Wall Street Journal (WSJ) or the New York Times (NYT). El Salvador's two largest dailies (La Prensa Grafica and El Diario de Hoy - see para 3) have agreements with both the WSJ and the NYT that allows them to publish regularly Spanish versions of certain articles and op-eds.

¶13. Annual surveys confirm television as the dominant news source for Salvadorans, surpassing radio by a small margin and newspapers by a much wider one. Nevertheless, radio remains the most demographically diverse info-entertainment medium in El Salvador and the one that is most constantly heard throughout any given day by listeners in their cars, offices, or homes. Among the most important stations with nationwide reach are Radio Cadena YSKL, YSUCA and the Radio Association "ARPAS" network (leftist), and Radio La Chevere (part of Grupo Samix which is owned by President Saca's family). Both the free-to-air television channels and many popular radio stations feature news commentary on morning talk shows that are hosted by well-known journalists.

¶14. By far the two most influential Salvadoran newspapers are the major dailies, La Prensa Grafica and El Diario de Hoy. Both have circulations of about 100,000, and each has a well-developed web site. Both are owned and operated by politically conservative families who have direct lines of communication with the Presidential Palace. La Prensa Grafica's editorial tone is generally centrist and sometimes critical of the government, while El Diario de Hoy's is more openly conservative and is considered the nationalistic voice of the elite "old guard." But together with the other three national dailies (conservative El Mundo, leftist Co-Latino, and sensationalist Mas!), the print media's influence is much greater than the circulation figures would suggest. Newspapers are closely read by the educated elite in government, business, and civil society, and carry regular features from American and European (principally Spanish) journals. It is also the print media that "break" the big news stories that broadcast media then cover. Op-eds in the major papers are also an effective and direct method of conveying messages to Salvador's elite and, through them, to the Salvadoran public. Reflective of the broad reach of newspapers is the fact that organizations and private citizens frequently purchase advertising space ("campos pagados") in order to communicate their views on specific issues to the general public.

15. Both print and broadcast media depend heavily on advertising dollars, print because circulation is relatively low and broadcast because most entertainment content must be bought from overseas suppliers. As a result, not only will media offer space and airtime to whomever can pay, media are also generally reluctant to report too aggressively on the news in a way that could offend their advertisers (including the government).

INFLUENCE OF PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS AND OFFICIALS

16. Members of the Cabinet and heads of various government agencies frequently talk to the media and wield influence, at least among the educated elite, in their areas of responsibility. With the general public, their popularity varies according to their perceived success or lack thereof. For example, recent polls have shown that the Ministers of Economy and Labor have the lowest public approval ratings due to low economic growth coupled with high unemployment and underemployment. The judiciary in particular suffers from a lack of public trust and credibility and is thus an important target for reform efforts. Many institutions in all three branches of government are perceived as unresponsive to social concerns such as access to potable water, affordable electricity, and decent health care; public trust of the institutions seems to have a positive correlation with trust of the individuals who head them.

17. The 84 members of the national Legislative Assembly and the mayors of El Salvador's 262 municipalities are also highly influential with the general public, as are the political parties. After the March 21, 2004 election, only the ruling Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) and the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) had garnered sufficient votes to ensure their continued existence. Since then, however, court decisions have kept the National Conciliation Party (PCN), the Christian Democratic Party (PDC), and the Democratic Center Party (CD) in existence; meanwhile, the FMLN itself has been beset by a series of defections that drained it of leaders as well as rank-and-file members, many of whom have joined a more moderate splinter party, the Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR). Mayors and Legislative Assembly members, or "diputados," are important target audiences to be approached both directly and indirectly in pursuit of MPP goals, including through NGOs or influential associations such as the Corporation of Salvadoran Municipalities (COMURES). Salvadoran political parties are influential because they control the agenda of the Legislative Assembly and because they have numerous loyal members among Salvadorans of voting age. While ruling party ARENA has great influence over the priorities of the national administration, FMLN or former FMLN mayors run El Salvador's capital and major cities, and FMLN mayors most often appear in the media. ARENA hopes to win more seats in the National Assembly and to capture control of more city halls in the elections scheduled for March, 2006; so far, polls indicate that ARENA's prospects look good.

CIVIL SOCIETY

18. The Catholic Church, mainline Protestant and evangelical churches, and social-activism NGOs, some of whom are closely allied with the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman (PDDH), are highly influential. Left-leaning groups that had expressed opposition to CAFTA-DR include El Salvador's few labor unions, certain humanitarian service NGOs, economic development think-tank FUNDE, and political NGOs such as the Center for Solidarity and Exchange (CIS by its Spanish initials). Leftist daily newspaper Co-Latino and radio stations such as YSUCA, Maya Vision, Radio Farabundo Marti, and Radio Venceremos (the voice of the FMLN in the war years) are the primary media for these groups. A few universities such as the Universidad Centroamericana Jose Simeon Canas (UCA), the Universidad de El Salvador (National University, or UES) and the Universidad Tecnologica wield influence that is probably enhanced by their public opinion polling capability.

19. Close ties between the government and the formal private sector (which falls, politically, between center-right and conservative) give the business community good access to senior government officials and a high degree of influence over government decisions. The free-market, free-trade agendas of various private-sector associations are reported regularly in the mainstream media and carry weight within the Salvadoran government and Legislative Assembly. These groups include the leading economic and social think-tank FUSADES, the National Private Enterprise Association (ANEP), associations of small and medium-sized businesses and exporters such as COEXPORT and FUNDAMYPE, and the Chambers of Commerce (including the American Chamber of Commerce), industry associations, and large conglomerates and their owners. Senior members of these organizations have sometimes gone on to hold political office; for example, President Saca himself used to be the President of ANEP.

OTHERS WHO WIELD INFLUENCE

¶10. Other persons of influence are those who regularly write newspaper columns and op-ed pieces and/or are interviewed in newspapers and on television news talk shows on the day's most pressing issues. They include Peace Accord negotiator and university rector David Escobar Gallindo, former Ambassador to the United States Ernesto Rivas Gallont, FUNDE head Roberto Rubio Fabian (see para 7), Economist Rafael Castellanos, and FMLN guerilla leader-turned FMLN-critic Joaquin Villalobos. Professionals such as doctors, lawyers, engineers, and professors are also widely respected and trusted.

¶11. One cannot discount the influence of the two million Salvadorans living overseas nor of the hometown associations and lobbying groups they have formed. In part because of the remittance dollars they represent, these groups are highly influential. They tend to have political orientations that encompass a wide range of views, but are strongly pro-immigrant. Many groups have sought voting rights in Salvadoran elections (not allowed under the current constitution) and therewith a more direct influence on politics, but as yet they are only indirectly influential in both the United States and El Salvador.

¶12. Finally, there is the rumor mill, kept active by close-knit networks of families, friends, school classmates, and other social circles. For example, regarding visas, many potential or actual applicants seem to trust the word of migration-assistance NGOs, less-scrupulous attorneys and "advisors," and their circles of family and friends more than they trust official information coming from the U.S. Consulate. (This is, however, beginning to change as PAS and the Consular Section have mounted a massive public outreach effort across radio, TV and print media as well as in Internet chat rooms; see para 17.)

INFLUENCE ANALYSIS BY MPP GOAL

¶13. Economic Growth and Development, Trade and Investment: Stimulating growth, jobs, and investment is a top concern for both the GOES and the Mission. Though public opinion polls show many Salvadorans are skeptical about the short-term benefits of adhering to what has come to be known as the Washington Consensus, they also show that, ultimately, Salvadorans believe open markets and free trade are the only ways their country can develop. ARENA's decisive victory in the March 21, 2004 presidential election and subsequent polls that give President Saca positive ratings in the 70th percentile indicate that stimulating growth, jobs, and investment is a top public concern, as is maintaining good relations with the United States in order to achieve those goals. In this environment, the views of pro-business governmental and nongovernmental institutions and those of prominent members of the business sector carry lots of weight. Though there was opposition expressed by some of the groups mentioned in para 7, pro-CAFTA forces won the day, making El Salvador the first CAFTA-DR country to ratify the agreement, in December 2004.

¶14. Democratic Systems and Practices: In order to promote reform of El Salvador's public institutions, decrease corruption, and thereby increase public faith in and support for democratic institutions, the Embassy continues to provide information, financial support, and exchange opportunities to local academic, media and civic organizations working to shape policy and/or promote participation in democratic processes. Some helpful strategies include supporting NGO activities such as the PAS and INL-funded Culture of Lawfulness program, and using USAID funds to finance programs aimed at reforming the judiciary, promoting transparency, and seeking/incorporating citizen input into decision-making.

¶15. Law Enforcement and Judicial Systems: In order to build public understanding of the related threats from terrorism, narcotics trafficking, and other crime, and to increase support for combating them, the Mission is working with the judicial sector to strengthen criminal statutes against conspiracy and alien smuggling, and with the recently-formed GOES anti-gang commission to reduce gang membership and violent crime related to gangs. Our educational exchanges and INL programs, especially those working directly with the police and municipal governments, are conduits to share U.S. best-practices, and to provide material support for anti-crime measures, drug abuse prevention, and treatment programs.

¶16. In April 2005, the State Department decided to seek agreement with El Salvador to establish an International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) in El Salvador. Post correctly anticipated opposition from the FMLN and others, who charged the ILEA would be a new "School of the Americas" training police in torture tactics. Groups of Embassy officers and interagency ILEA representatives met with the FMLN and

judicial-issues NGOs to address their concerns, and invited them to observe ILEA-type training taking place in El Salvador. Opposing voices continue to be heard from time to time, but they seem confined to the nongovernmental Federation for Legal Studies (FESPAD) and the much-splintered FMLN.

¶17. To curb illegal migration yet facilitate legal travel to the U.S., the Mission is actively increasing public understanding of the U.S. visa process and the dangers of illegal immigration through public meetings, interviews and press briefings and through regular communication with the Directorate of Migration and the Foreign Ministry.

Representatives from the Consular Section and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) appear almost weekly on radio and television, and hold regular sessions with NGOs and GOES agencies dealing with migration, including the National Civilian Police (PNC), the Salvadoran immigration service, and various adoption services. Post also shows "message" videos in consular waiting areas. The fact that El Salvador depends on the nearly \$3 billion in remittances it receives annually (equal to about 14 percent of its GDP) hinders these efforts, as do very real hopes of greater economic opportunity and reunification with family members in the United States. While it is difficult to change the cost-benefit calculation in the minds of individual intending immigrants, GOES officials and newspaper editors have recently shown less of a tendency to turn a blind eye toward unlimited emigration, while paying more attention toward some of the adverse effects of family disintegration and even the massive inflow of remittances.

¶18. Close Ties with Neighbors and Key Allies: Along with El Salvador's support in international fora on issues such as free trade and democracy and its leadership in regional integration efforts, El Salvador's contribution of five six-month rotations of 360 troops each to the Coalition effort in Iraq is a policy the Saca Administration has continued, despite polls showing the majority of the public opposed. Continued close military relationships are key to this effort, given the high public credibility of the armed forces and their commitment to remaining out of politics. The Mission will also continue our multiple collaborations with the Salvadoran armed forces, using IMET and FMF funding for training and supplies/repairs, and organizing public events showing our appreciation for Salvadoran collaboration in international peacekeeping efforts.

¶19. COMMENT: Since Post first composed an Influence Analysis cable in March 2004 (reftel A), three more rotations of Salvadoran soldiers have served in Iraq, CAFTA has been ratified, and El Salvador has continued to be one of our closest allies in the Hemisphere. Recent newspaper commentary suggests, however, that influential circles believe El Salvador ought to be getting more from the United States - greater immigration benefits, more development assistance, increased aid in the aftermath of the devastation of Hurricane Stan in October, greater understanding about the difficulties of accepting Salvadoran criminals deported from the U.S., and so on. Post will continue to seek opportunities to emphasize the long-term commitment of the United States to El Salvador over many years, and on the part of many agencies: USAID, the Peace Corps, the U.S. military, the Department of State, and more.

BARCLAY